No. 5

Museum Notes

INFORMATION SHEETS
from the
NEWFOUNDLAND MUSEUM

The Dorset Eskimos: People of Earth and Water

The girl's eyes narrowed as she watched the shadow grow on the horizon. It didn't look like her father's small skin boat; it was too large. She waited a moment to be certain, then turned and fled towards the tent where her mother was busy sewing new garments for the coming winter. Flinging aside the skin door flap, the girl shouted, "Mother! Strangers are coming, in big boats of a kind I have never seen!"

Stunned, her mother recalled her husband's strange dream which told of a new people who were invading the land to the north and to the west. His dream had foretold that soon the strangers would come here, to the eastern sea.

Now, with her man away seeking the bear spirit, she and the child were helpless. Trying to clear her mind, she slowly got up and peered outside. The boats were indeed enormous; so wide they had to be propelled by people on each side with single-bladed paddles. It seemed to the woman that all the people in the world must be packed into the two boats. She stood for a moment, undecided, then caught the child up in her arms and fled the camp, running inland to the hills.

...The man could not find the bear. His dream had told him to come to this place beside the breast-shaped hill, and there he would find a huge polar bear, which would be waiting to do battle with him. If he could defeat it, the bear's spirit would be his, to protect his family from the coming danger. His fingers found the soapstone image he had carved after his dream. He had been as certain, carving the stone, of the shapes he was forming as if the bear was inside the stone all along, waiting for release.

But the bear was not here. He waited through two nights, to be sure, but saw no animals at all, not even a seal. For the first time, the spirits had deserted him. Disappointed, he began to bring his camping and hunting gear down to the small boat. Pulling his high-collared coat close to his head, he began to paddle for home.

He saw the boats as he passed the high black cliffs near his island. At first his heart lifted at the thought of visitors from his people to the north, but a second glance filled him with alarm, for these boats were not of the People. These were huge, open boats unlike his single-person hunting craft. Quickly, his eyes searched the shore for the woman and their child, but he saw only the strange tents of the newcomers. Perhaps she had managed to flee. He cached his boat on the shore opposite the black cliffs and keeping carefully out of sight of the strangers, began the walk into the hills.

(continued on page 4)

Soapstone carving of a Polar Bear. Height 4.3 cm.

Although this story is fictional, it may be a fairly accurate account of a dramatic clash of cultures that occurred on the Labrador coast approximately 600 years ago. Before the ancestors of the modern Inuit came to the Labrador area, an early Eskimo people, called the Dorset by archaeologists, inhabited much of Arctic Canada and the island of Newfoundland. Their mysterious disappearance has continued to puzzle scientists since the culture was first named in 1925 by the famous Canadian archaeologist, Diamond Jenness. Just as the story on page one has no ending, neither, at this time, does the archaeological one.

The ancestors of the Dorset first developed their distinct culture in Alaska. By about 4000 years ago, its people occupied much of the Arctic. These earliest Eskimos are admired by archaeologists for their finely-made tools. The remains of their camps indicate that they lived in scattered groups consisting of one or two families. These earliest Eskimos probably lived fairly uncomfortable lives. Their houses seem to have been very small and were probably built on the surface as tents, rather than being dug into the ground for protection against the wind and cold. Gradually, the people houses changed; they became larger and were excavated to a depth of about 50 cm into the ground for greater warmth and permanence. In both Labrador and Newfoundland, some Dorset houses had large stones for the base of the walls, wood or whalebone rafters to support a roof of sod and skins, and sods were piled around the foundations for warmth. Inside, the central passage of flat paving stones was often bordered by upright stone slabs. These slabs may have been used as a divider between the passageway and the sitting/sleeping areas. The sleeping areas would have been made more comfortable by heaping spruce branches together with thick caribou hides on top. Box-shaped hearths are found in the central passage. There are often two or more hearths in a house. In Newfoundland and parts of Labrador wood-burning fires were common, while in the rest of the Arctic and northern Labrador the stone lamp, filled with sea mammal oil, was used for heat and light.

Because archaeologists have not found evidence of these types of houses for certain periods of the year, they believe that some Dorset people may have lived in snow houses out on the ice for part of the winter. They did not have large dog teams for travelling to the open water for seal and walrus hunting. Once the winter had set in, open water would have been found only at a great distance from land; so it would have been an advantage to build temporary houses nearer the hunt. Of course, snow houses on the sea ice did not leave much for the archaeologist to find, so we can not be certain that the Dorset knew this technology.

Because skins and other organic materials do not usually survive through time, we know very little about the kind of clothing the Dorset wore. Recent discoveries in some sites in the Arctic and in Labrador of small figures carved by Dorset artists many hundreds of years ago, have given us some indication of Dorset clothing design. Although they have been found on sites hundreds of miles apart, each figure shows a distinctive type of coat with a very high collar. We think that the Dorset wore these instead of the hooded parka of the Inuit. Perhaps they wore a hat of some kind, or perhaps the collar could be attached across the top for warmth.

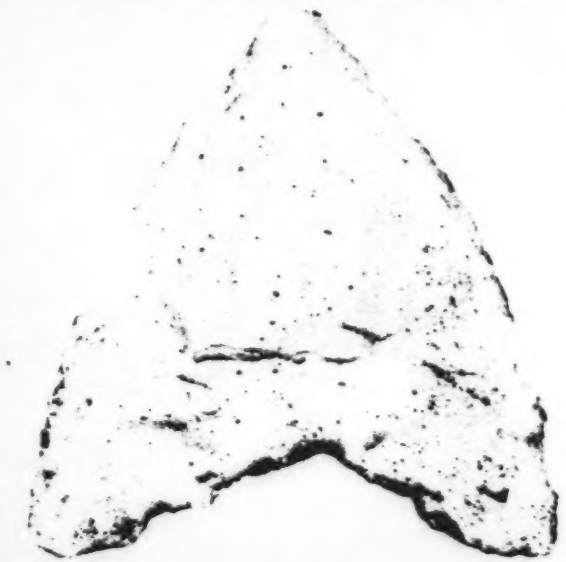
Soapstone carving from Shuldham Island. Height 3.0 cm.

Through studying the evidence available to us, we are beginning to understand more about the material life of the Dorset. The places they chose to live and the kinds of tools we find in these places tell us that they hunted seals, walrus, caribou and birds and fished the rivers and lakes near their camps. For most of their lives, they lived on the coasts and inner islands, going inland only briefly to hunt caribou. As yet, little evidence has been found of inland camps, so we assume that these trips, if they took place, did so over a few days only. They did not have the huge boats *(umiak)* of the Inuit, nor the dog-drawn sleds; so they would have had to carry everything on their backs or on small, hand-drawn sleds. Because they lacked dogs, large sleds and boats, they could not hunt over the same wide territories as the Inuit. This was probably one reason why they kept their settlements small. Only a few families would live near each other.

Artist's reconstruction of the interior of a Dorset house.

We assume the Dorset had boats because nearly all coastal people do. They did not need large boats for limited numbers of people, so probably had craft similar to the Inuit *kayak*. A Dorset site in the central Arctic had recently yielded small wooden models which do resemble the *kayak*.

The Dorset used stone to make weapons, tools and household utensils such as pots and lamps; they also used stone to build their houses, floors and foundations. They understood the properties of each kind of stone — how it fractured when broken, whether it could withstand heat, whether it could be easily ground. For each purpose they knew what kind of stone to use, or whether wood, bone or ivory might serve better.[1] Further, they knew where to find the best stone and didn't mind making a long journey, or trading valuable provisions to get it. Ramah chert is a special kind of quartzite found only around Ramah Bay in northern Labrador, yet it was traded and used by native people as far south as New England. No people used it more often, or better, than the Dorset. Over half of the tools and utensils found in Labrador Dorset sites, are made of Ramah chert. It was extensively used by Newfoundland Dorset as well, which indicates that contact was maintained with their relatives in Labrador.



Late Dorset type end blade made of Ramah chert.

One way of learning more about the Dorset people is to listen to Inuit legends. The Inuit tell us that when they came to this country, they found people already living here. They called these people the *Tunnit*.[2] Because these people lived differently and spoke a different language, the Inuit often fought with them. This hostility from a technologically superior and numerically larger people was probably a factor in the disappearance of the Dorset culture. The stories have also given us many hints about Dorset lifestyle, although like all old stories, they have been exagerated over the years. Often they tell us that the *Tunnit* were giants with superhuman strength. This makes the stories of the fighting between Inuit and Dorset more exciting and makes the Inuit heroes of the tales more heroic. Archaeologists have shown, however, that the Dorset were people of normal size.

Both the Inuit stories and the archaeological record agree on some points, and both have been especially helpful in giving us a picture of the Dorset religious life. It seems quite certain that the Dorset believed that life was ruled by spirits and that these spirits had to be obeyed if life were to continue. One very important spirit was that of the bear. The bear may have been either a ruling or a helping spirit; that is, it may have helped the hunter to understand and meet the conditions imposed by the ruling spirit (which controlled things like the weather). The powers of a helping spirit would always have been available to the hunter in a time of crisis. We find many carvings of bears and bear heads in Dorset sites. Often these have tiny holes at one end, which would have allowed them to be hung around a person's neck or form a part of the clothing. The Inuit also believed in the power of bears; this is a belief common to many groups of native Americans. This is not surprising when one considers how human-like a bear can be, especially when standing up on its hind legs. As well, the polar bear is the only animal a human need fear in the Arctic. The combination of fear, admiration and empathy, or "fellow-feeling", for the bear could have easily given rise to religious devotion.

Many questions about the Dorset Eskimo culture remain to be answered. Was their lifestyle very different from that of the Inuit? Did the Dorset meet the Norse explorers on the coasts of Labrador or Newfoundland in the years around 1000 A.D.? Most importantly, what happened to make the entire Dorset culture, from the western Arctic to the southern tip of Newfoundland, simply disappear? We know, from the legends of the Inuit, that the two cultures were in conflict. Probably many Dorset people were killed by Inuit. But there were no Inuit in some parts of the Dorset domain, such as Newfoundland, yet the Dorset culture disappeared here as well. Perhaps the ancestors of the Beothuck account for their disappearance here. Certainly, the thousands of years of Arctic isolation would not have equipped the Dorset for battles with other cultures.

We may never know the reason for their mysterious disappearance, but each year the search continues.

Realistic and abstract carvings of bear heads from Dorset sites in Newfoundland and Labrador.

1. Since organic materials are rarely preserved in prehistoric sites, much less is known about their use.
2. This is an invented name, just as our name for them — *Dorset* — is. We don't know what they called themselves.

At first, things had not gone badly. The newcomers were friendly enough. Although they spoke a different language, their interest in the new land encouraged the growth of a rough sign language with the man and his family. When winter came, the man showed them how he hunted seals. The long wait at the ice edge was dangerous and uncomfortable; one could easily freeze. So he showed them, when he knelt down, how his wide coat formed a little tent, big enough for a small lamp to be lit and pushed underneath. They in turn showed him how to use a dog to sniff out the seal's breathing hole and to pull the catch on the long trip back to land. The first months passed in peace.

The dark period was always a time of hunger. But this year it was worse than usual. The strangers' magic was so much stronger than his; they caught so many more animals with their strange weapons and their dogs and huge sleds, that it seemed there were none left for him. Finally, in desperation, he and the woman made their decision to leave in search of a place where the strangers might not come, a less desirable place with fewer animals to hunt.

In the cold, dim light, his wife prepared their belongings; and they began their journey. Behind them in the abandoned house lay some old tools and broken utensils. Because it was too heavy to carry in her pack, the woman had gouged a hole through her stone lamp, so that its spirit might follow, and left it upside-down on the hearth. The carving of the bear, whose spirit had refused to come to him, lay discarded beside the man's broken tools and the other remains of their life on the island.

When the spring sun began to warm the land once more, the Inuit were alone on the coast.

On the northern Labrador coast, archaeologists continue to excavate Dorset sites. In one, we found the man's carved bear, and on the abandoned hearth lay an inverted stone lamp. A hole gouged through its base inspired the ending to our story.

Jane Sproull-Thomson
Spring, 1981
Revised: Summer, 1984

Artist's interpretation of a Dorset hunter. This drawing was inspired by the Shuldham Island carving (See Figure 3).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Clark, Brenda	*Spirits of Earth and Water.* A catalogue on the Dorset people published in conjunction with a travelling exhibition produced by the Newfoundland Museum, with the assistance of the National Museums of Canada, 1981.
Linnamae, Urve L.	*The Dorset Culture: A Comparative Study in Newfoundland and the Arctic.* Newfoundland Museum, Technical Bulletin Series No. 1, 1975.
McGhee, Robert	*Canadian Arctic Prehistory.* National Museum of Man, 1978.
Tuck, James A.	*Newfoundland and Labrador Prehistory.* National Museum of Man, 1976.

Produced with assistance from the Museum Assistance Programmes of the National Museums of Canada.

NEWFOUNDLAND MUSEUM, HISTORIC RESOURCES DIVISION
DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, RECREATION AND YOUTH
GOVERNMENT OF NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR